

The Beats: A Graphic History.

Text by Harvey Pekar, et al. Art by Ed Piskor et al. Ed. Paul Buhle.

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An early media critic once remarked that television represented a dubious development over radio; the audience could now hear and SEE the static. Scholars who have lamented the distortion and disinformation that too frequently infest the Beat field might grimace and offer a similar observation regarding Harvey Pekar's graphic foray into Beat history. This book's errors—both textual and pictorial—render versions of the Beat Generation at variance with the ones we know. It's one thing to write that after quitting the Columbia football team Kerouac returned to his home in Lowell; it's another matter to illustrate that home with a drawing of a quaint suburban bungalow. Lapses such as these ought to unsettle scholars, but scholars are not the intended audience. As with the original Beats, this work shoots straight for the young and the hip.

Widely known for his *American Splendor* series, Pekar has developed a story-telling style that is gritty, honest, and often autobiographical. R. Crumb's artwork in the early publications solidified Pekar's "street cred" as an authentic underground comic figure. The movie treatment of *American Splendor* (2003) boosted Pekar to mainstream renown. His background, combined with Paul Buhle's ethos as a senior lecturer at Brown University—and writer and editor of numerous histories of leftist movements—would lead readers to anticipate their collaboration on the Beats. With eighteen people contributing text and artwork to twenty-five separate sections, the book becomes a sponge of messiness that threatens to seep out of its covers; maybe that's appropriate to its subject, though. Buhle and Pekar state in their introduction that their book has "no pretension to the depth of coverage and literary interpretation presented by hundreds of scholarly books in many languages." In their slapdash way, they do succeed in recreating both the energy and murk of the Beats for a new generation.

In the first half of the book, Pekar and artist Ed Piskor focus on three key figures: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs. What is initially noticeable is that these guys do not particularly resemble the ones we have come to know through photos, videos, or personal appearances. Granted, when conveying history, graphic artists possess a prerogative to convey selected elements of character, rather than pictorial likenesses, but in this case, I would never have guessed these sketches depicted Kerouac without being clued in by the accompanying text. There is additional distortion beyond the lack of resemblance, though. Even as a youth, Piskor's Kerouac staggers from scene to scene, leering and drooling, or gazing listlessly, entirely lacking charisma and drive. All of Piskor's characters tend to the grotesque, and his scenes are flatly drawn, lacking detail and variety of perspective.

The images are simply not compelling. Then there are the various factual errors, some small, some not so small, but each adds incrementally to the judgment that the text cannot

be relied upon. Pekar claims that *On the Road*'s "realism was heightened by Jack's 'sketching'"; that "Good Blonde," Kerouac's account of a hitched ride with a beautiful woman, was a poem; and that *Visions of Gerard* was written "decades" before it was published. Piskor shows David Kammerer's body falling from a high bridge and Kerouac chatting on the phone with Arabel Porter, an editor of *New World Writing*. None of these contentions are supported by published facts. In fact, Kerouac developed his prose sketching technique in October 1951, six months after completing his draft of "On the Road." His prose sketches are an integral part of his next work, *Visions of Cody*, but not of *On the Road*. And while Kerouac preferred to blur the distinction between poetry and prose, no editor, or most readers, would categorize "Good Blonde" as a poem. Kerouac wrote *Visions of Gerard* ten years before its publication, and while this span would have been frustrating, it hardly represents "decades." Frankly, the text is rather straightforward and reportorial, and the art is not inspired. It may serve to broaden the scope of the Beat story for folks who know a bit of the lore, but all in all, the first half of the book is a disappointment.

In the second half, though, matters improve. Pekar and Piskor embark on a series of two-page treatments of various writers, including Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Robert Duncan, and LeRoi Jones that serve to explain and to enlarge the Beat circle. One also finds some truly surprising entries in the second half, beginning with "The Janitor," with story and art by Jerome Neukirch, revealing the little-known life and work of Slim Brundage. The section on Kenneth Patchen features a plentiful offering of lines from his poems, the Philip Lamantia section is illustrated with a photographic realism, the style of the Diane di Prima section is evocatively psychedelic, and the classic comic lines and perspectives of "Jay Defeo: The Rose" render it instantly appealing.

One of the most striking sections is "Beatnik Chicks," written by Joyce Brabner, Pekar's wife. Brabner presents a personal perspective on various Beat women and delivers unflinching observations, as when she castigates Neal Cassady and LeRoi Jones for their self-serving treatment of their wives.

I found the hippest, beatest entry to be the final one, "Tuli Kupferberg," a sprawling, zany story that captures not only the biography of the Fugs but also the cultural sprawl of the late 1960s and '70s, the counter-cultural highs and up-against-the-establishment lows. Artist Jeffrey Lewis crafts a panel that pays homage to Crumb's iconic "Keep on Truckin'" character, as Kupferberg and Ed Sanders come strutting up a Village street, and thus a link is made between generations, again. After closing the final page, one may still hear the reverberating hum of the Beat buzz and catch a whiff of the lingering scent. With its flaws, one can't help but to appreciate the artist's spirit in the crafting of the book. It has to be taken as a whole.

The book lacks any academic apparatus, such as a "List for Further Reading," and only two sections mention any secondary sources at all. Students should not cite this book as a source on the Beats, but they probably won't want to even let their teachers know they are reading it. Maybe they'll be sneaking it under their desks when they are supposed to

be “learning.” If “The Beats: A Graphic History” inspires these students to explore the literature and to read the letters and journals of the writers, then it is a success.